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## **Opposing Free Trade**

By Michael Barone

The Democratic Party, narrowly defeated in the elections of 2000, 2002, and 2004, is lashing out in fury at George W. Bush's Republicans. You can see the evidence in the Senate debate where they are claiming as a time-honored tradition their recent practice of filibustering appellate court nominees. Yet only 14 years ago, when the nomination of Clarence Thomas was before the Senate, no Democratic senator gave serious consideration to a filibuster, though there were enough senators opposed to Thomas to uphold one. Evidently every senator then considered a filibuster unthinkable. Today the unthinkable is a time-honored tradition.

At least on this issue the Democrats are fighting for a result that is in line with their long-held principles: This is a fight ultimately about Supreme Court nominations and whether Bush's nominees will need 50 votes or 60 to be confirmed. More distressing was watching Democrats on another, less visible, issue last week. On this one, their current stands are if not in conflict then certainly in tension with their party's historic and recent stands. That issue is the Central America Free Trade Agreement, negotiated by former Special Trade Representative Robert Zoellick and now advanced by his successor, former Rep. Rob Portman.

CAFTA covers Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua, Costa Rica, and the Dominican Republic and is similar to other free-trade agreements that have been approved by Congress--with Mexico and Canada in November 1993, Jordan in July 2001, Singapore and Chile in July 2003, Australia and Morocco in July 2004. There is this difference: Under the Caribbean Basin Initiative, begun in the 1980s, more than 80 percent of the products from CAFTA countries already enter the U.S. duty free. CAFTA would immediately remove import barriers on most U.S. manufactured goods and half of U.S. farm exports. CAFTA would also allow a small increase in sugar exports to the United States, rising from 1.2 percent of current sugar consumption in the first year to 1.7 percent 15 years later.

Like the free-trade agreement with Australia, CAFTA seems to be an almost unalloyed win-win. U.S. manufacturers and farmers would gain access to markets. U.S. farm interests have been pushing to open up Cuba, which has 11 million people with very low incomes. CAFTA would open up countries with 46 million people with higher incomes. CAFTA countries would be able to import U.S. textiles and fabrics and use them to make apparel that would be competitive with Chinese products. That's why the National Council of Textile Organizations endorsed CAFTA.

Protectionism. Yet it appears that most Democrats and not a few Republicans are set to oppose CAFTA. Why? Well, the AFL-CIO opposes it, as it has almost all free-trade agreements--even the one with Australia, a huge market for U.S. manufacturers, whose

labor laws are arguably more protective than those in the United States. And the sugar lobby, protected by tariffs of more than 100 percent and import quotas, opposes even CAFTA's small increase in imports. Big Sugar is listened to by members from states that produce sugar cane (Louisiana, Florida) and sugar beets (North Dakota, Michigan). CAFTA has also been opposed by Reps. Ellen Tauscher, Ron Kind, Adam Smith, and Artur Davis of the House New Democrat Coalition. They complain about the labor provisions, even though they largely meet International Labor Organization standards and are similar to Morocco's, for whose FTA all four voted. They add that the federal budget voted by congressional Republicans reduces funding for trade adjustment assistance and job training.

This is pretty thin gruel. The labor standards Zoellick negotiated provide for stronger enforcement of ILO standards. Over the past 20 years, most CAFTA countries have moved from dictatorship and, in some cases, civil war to democracy and the rule of law; their economies, with help from the CBI, have moved from subsistence to manufacturing. But the CBI expires in 2008, and unless it is replaced by CAFTA the United States will have shoved its neighbors backward. The Democratic Party was historically the party of free trade, and House Democrats provided between 75 and 120 votes for previous FTA s. The Democrats' rage against Bush and the Republicans is understandable. But do they really want to turn their back on their history and our neighbors?